

As Lent approaches, Catholics, Episcopalians renew traditions

by Michael Miller

Ash Wednesday on Feb. 21 is the advent of Lent, and with this observance come many traditions.

Ashes on the forehead. Hot cross buns. Fish on Friday. Fasting between meals. Stations of the Cross. Penance services. Coins in the box every day for the poor. Giving up (fill in the blank) for Lent.

SOLEMN TIME - Catholics and Episcopalians renew traditions as Lent approaches. CNS Illustration by Michael Anthony Noel. Even fast-food restaurants get into the mood, advertising Friday specials on fish sandwiches, when many Roman Catholics and others refrain from the pleasure of eating meat.

"Lent is a solemn time," said Monsignor Richard Soseman, pastor of St. Mary of the Woods Catholic Church in Princeton, Ill. "We realize our shortcomings and how much we have to change. It's not always the most likable season."

Bishop Keith Ackerman of the Episcopal Diocese of Quincy, Ill., concurred.

"There is something countercultural about Ash Wednesday and Lent," he said. "It functions in opposition to the cultural drive to be 'No. 1.' Even for Christians, the season of Lent seems terribly long. Often the dramatic resolve that is complete with numerous resolutions break down often before the 40 days are over and the triumph of Easter has come."

Lent runs for 40 days - not including Sundays - leading up to Easter, which this year is April 8 for Western Christians.

Lenten traditions, the Episcopal bishop of Quincy said, keep Christians who observe the season aware of many things. "The marvelous thing about the ageless customs, traditions and expressions that have been preserved by the church is that no matter what our state in life as an adult, we are drawn back to our earliest memories of what those expressions meant to us in a simpler, less complex time in our life," Ackerman said. "As a child, I vividly remember the simpler meals during Lent, and I remember my mother reminding me to put part of my allowance and later part of my paperboy earnings into our 'mite box.'"

In the Catholic Church, some things have changed and some have remained the same for Lent since Vatican II, Soseman said. Many older Catholics still eat a meal with meat once a day - and not at all on Fridays - during Lent, but that custom hasn't carried over to younger Catholics since the requirement was dropped in the 1960s, Soseman said.

"It was felt that people would do them because of love or for spiritual growth, but it was the '60s and people weren't taking on sacrifices, so a lot of those things fell by the wayside," Soseman said.

Fasting and abstinence are still a major part of Lent observance in several Christian traditions, though. Episcopalians are urged to fast completely until 3 p.m. on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Roman Catholics of certain ages must eat only one full meal and fast from food between meals on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; they also must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays of Lent.

The Orthodox Church faithful prepare for Great Lent by not eating meat the week before the season starts. The first week of Lent includes a fast from Monday morning to Wednesday evening; the only two full meals of the week are on Wednesday and Friday.

During that week and all of Lent, meat and animal products, fish, dairy products, wine and oil are avoided. Other fasting rules apply for Holy Week.

The beginning of Lent is still a big draw for Catholics. Soseman said it probably has the best Mass attendance next to Christmas and Easter, even more surprising since Ash Wednesday, despite its visibility, isn't a holy day of obligation for Catholics.

In Catholic churches, Episcopal churches and even, more increasingly, some classic Protestant churches, ashes are smeared on the head of the participant, usually in the form of the sign of the cross.

"When they're put on the head of the penitent, the priest says 'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return,' or 'Turn from your sin and be faithful to the Gospel,'" Soseman said.

Ashes are used as an ancient symbol of repentance, he said. They are produced from the burning of palm leaves that had been used the previous Palm Sunday, the day that begins the final week of Lent.

According to Gospel accounts, crowds waved palm fronds to give Jesus a regal welcome to Jerusalem just days before they would abandon him.

"It's kind of a cycle," Soseman said. "Theologically, on Palm Sunday, the palms become the mark of the traitor. That reminds us that we're getting into Lent because the passion of Christ comes at the end."

The ashes one receives on Ash Wednesday are a lingering reminder of one's sinfulness, Ackerman said. "I recall as a boy that the cross of ashes on my forehead was a much more significant reminder for me than the lump of coal in my stocking at Christmastime," the bishop said. "The lump of coal was lost in the exuberance of opening Christmas presents, but the cross of ashes was still there to be seen on my forehead throughout the day, and if I were stingy with the soap, it was there in a muted form the next morning as a reminder of those poignant words, 'Remember O Man that you are dust and unto dust shall you return.'"

Another reminder that it's Lent are the self-sacrifices many Christians are encouraged to make during the period. Soseman said the practice usually involves abstaining from "things that we're particularly attached to, that have become too much a part of our lives."

"Some people give up smoking for Lent or soda or some specific candy. Some people give up things like gossip for Lent, or things they usually fall into that isn't the best for them."

Many people who abstain from something will indulge in it on Sundays, since other Lenten restrictions are lifted on the day on which Christians celebrate the Resurrection. Soseman urges his parishioners to continue their sacrifices even on Sundays. "On the other hand," he said, "some will stress that instead of giving up, we should take up extra things that we're doing for other people."

Many also add devotional practices, like Stations of the Cross or weekday Mass attendance, during Lent, Soseman said. "Daily Mass attendance increases almost double during Lent" at St. Mary of the Woods, Soseman said.

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